[P.19]

3. The Loa: Gods of the Haitian Mountains

The supernatural world of the common people of Haiti is a vast, rich, and unexplored world. It is peopled with thousands of gods who may at any time come down a rocky mountain trail, or up from the bottom of the sea, or out of the springs where people drink, to enter the *hounfor* of the Vodoun priest or the humblest of thatched huts. The gods—variously called *loa, mystère, hounsi*, or *vodoun*,[1]—may come at strange, unexpected moments to the unlikeliest places. Yet whenever they come they are recognized for what they are. The things they say and do bear the mark of their character and their special powers, and usually there is little disagreement over their identity.

The Haitians tell you that the loa live "in Africa," or on "the island below the sea," or "beneath the water," or in a mythological city called La Ville-aux-Camps. The loa are believed to share this residing place with the spirits of certain categories of the dead. What goes on in the land of the loa is no man's knowledge and every man's conjecture. They say that a few privileged people have been able to go down "below the water" and return.

In the region of Gros Morne there is a legend of a woman named Madame Ste Ile who went under the water and returned after seven years. There is another widespread tale of a man near La Baie Moustique who, in full public view, walked into the bay and disappeared, and returned in a few hours bearing a cake in his hands—a gift from the loa below the water. And in the hills near Aux Cayes in the south a story is told about a loa named *Général* Clermeil, who drove up in a fine carriage and carried off a woman to his place below the water.

On certain occasions the loa come to pass the time among their "children" in Haiti. When a loa comes to the people he enters the body of one or another of them, or he enters many of them at the same time. In cult terminology, these people are his "horses." The loa mounts his horses, as

[1] [For footnote, see category 116, pp. 349-350.—Ed.]

2: Courlander 8-5 (1927-1955) 1960 SV3 Hait1 8V3

houngan took his place before the small altar and the cross surmounted by the skull. Again he spoke *langage* and rattled his asson. He took from the altar a small-necked bottle containing a white alcoholic liquid and a tight-fitting iron cross. The presence of the iron cross inside the bottle was represented as a magical phenomenon. The houngan took a mouthful of the white liquid and sprayed it out in a fine mist over the skull. Twice more he sprayed the mist, in different directions. Then he poured a little of the liquid directly on the skull. The room was filled with the smell of alcohol. The houngan lighted a candle and sat in a low chair facing the altar. He shook his asson rhythmically and spoke *langage* to Pinga Maza. Suddenly Pinga Maza entered the houngan's head. The houngan became violent. He jerked this way and that, making strange noises in his throat. He seized a machete from the altar, waved it around, and struck the flat of it against his head. He continued for a while to beat his head fiercely with the machete. Gradually he became quiet. His assistants placed Pinga's red jacket on him. Now he spoke in the tired voice of an old man. He complained that he was hungry, that he had not eaten for a long while. His assistant handed him a razor blade. He placed it in his mouth, chewed it up, and swallowed it, washing it down with more of the white liquid in the bottle. He asked for more, and they gave him a second blade to eat. He demanded a third, and ate that, too, spitting out small fragments of steel that caught in his teeth.

His assistant told him there was a man present seeking advice about a pouin. The possessed houngan looked around with half-closed eyes. He asked the man his name, and what he wanted. After hearing the client's story, the houngan took out a deck of cards and placed them one at a time, face up, on a winnowing tray. After studying the cards he said: "You are strong, but not strong enough. You already have some protections, but they do not protect you from the dangers coming your way. You have powerful enemies. You must have a new pouin." The man said yes, he wanted a new pouin, but how much would it cost? Pinga replied through the mouth of the houngan: "Twenty-five dollars." The man said: "I will get the money and return." He went out after placing five gourdes on the winnowing tray with the cards. Pinga became drowsy. The houngan's head fell forward on his chest and he slept. The divining session was ended.

The Water Road

The land where the loa live, the place "below the water," is not thought of as being in the water itself. It is dry and airy, like the countryside of Haiti. But the route to it is through water.

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1965) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

of Haiti. But the route to it is through water. When the Haitians say "under the water" they do not mean under the sea. The ocean is regarded as the special domain of Agwé, La Sirène, and a few related deities, but it has nothing to do with most loa. "Under the water" specifically means under the springs, the rivers, and the fresh-water lakes. Fresh water has the greatest of significance in relation to most of the Vodoun deities.

When a loa comes to visit his Haitian children he comes by way of the *chimin dleau* (the water road)—that is to say, by way of the river, the waterfall, or the spring. Because the spring is the primary source of fresh water, it is the most direct means of contact with the land of the loa. Tales are heard everywhere of persons who, drawing water from the spring at night, heard the voices of loa or the sound of singing and drumming coming up from somewhere below. And virtually all the tales about human beings who visited the land of the loa describe them as descending into a river or disappearing into a waterfall.

The loa are accustomed to traveling by the "water road." And in all aspects of the Vodoun service, this "water road" is refreshed and replenished. When the road is dry, contact with the loa is diminished. When it is moist, the loa travel easily.

Thus, the houngan constantly uses water to entice and invite the deities. He holds a glass or pitcher of water at the center pole of his peristyle. He extends it toward the four cardinal points. He spills water at the foot of the center pole. He spills water in the hounfor at the foot of the *pé*, or altar. He sets a pitcher of water at the gateway of his habitation. And often, during a service, he pours a pathway of water in the dust from his gateway into his peristyle. Within nearly every hounfor there is at least one *basin*, or pool, dedicated to the loa who is the *maît' caille*, the master of the house. These pools are carefully filled with water drawn from the springs. They are places of rest and refreshment for the deities whose names or portraits are inscribed on the walls above.

Sometimes rites and services are held at the site of the spring, the houngan and his entourage marching down to it from the hounfor for the occasion. So, too, there are annual pilgrimages to waterfalls such as Saut d'Eau, where the loa mount their "horses" in profusion.

Within the hounfor, during a service, the cult priest and the servitors pour "libations" of water on the earth, so that the loa may be refreshed. And virtually without end, the hounfor is the scene of ritual ceremonies in which the loa is bathed and thus "renewed" in the heads of his servitors.[2]

[2 [For footnote, see category 16, p. 351.--Analyst]